



For El by 2Dglasses

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Angst, Hurt-Comfort

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., Max M.

Status: Completed

Published: 2019-07-29 07:44:25

Updated: 2019-07-29 07:44:25

Packaged: 2019-12-12 16:51:45

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 7,649

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: A year ago Max knew nothing about Eleven. She was just a character in a rather fantastic story that was told to her. Then she actually met her. The story of Max and El's developing friendship. Starting from their first shaky meeting and continuing through to the Party's battle against Billy and The Mind Flayer.

For El

Max didn't know much about Eleven. The way the mysterious girl was explained to her was like something from a superhero comic book. She came from the woods with powers and helped the boys save their missing friend. She really didn't believe Lucas when he first told her about everything that had happened the previous year. That was until she saw her first Demodog. As she sat on top of that school bus with Lucas in the junkyard that foggy night, in the back of her mind she had a thought.

They're real. These things do exist. And if they do then there must really have been a girl called Eleven who used her super powers to help them find Will. She wished she could have met her...

Little did she know that in a few hours she would get her wish. When the door of the Byers' house creaked open by itself and the dark figure stepped through she just knew. Although, their introduction was far from warm, Max didn't really have time to get hung up on being ignored by The Mage because the threat of dying was causing her to be somewhat concentrated. Don't get eaten by the Demodogs.

But she did admit, seeing how much difficulty they had with a few of those things back at the junkyard and then seeing how easy Eleven had subdued the one that was still lying in the corner of the living room, she did feel a lot safer having this girl just in the same room as her.

She was an enigma. She spoke very little and had a troubled look about her. Mike never elaborated in his description of the girl. The only thing Max had to go on at this moment was purely from her appearance and from where the red head stood, Eleven was the coolest kid she'd ever seen.

So after everything went down and everybody regrouped at the Byers'; Steve and the kids, Joyce, Nancy, Jonathan and Will, and finally Hopper and Eleven, there was an exhausted relief within the group. Everybody stayed in the Byers' house that night. Together.

It was about 4 a.m and it was quiet. Max was on the floor next to

Lucas who was softly snoring, having passed out a few minutes ago. But Max couldn't. Her mind was racing. So much had happened over the last week that she was trying to process. But at this moment in time she was having difficulty, and although she appreciated being close to her new friends, the body heat was immense so she decided to get herself a glass of water.

She quietly stood up and made her way out through the hall. It was dark, but as she made her way towards the kitchen she saw a warm glow, a table lamp next to the couch. She stopped when she heard a deep voice. She leaned against the corner of the wall with her palm and focused on the shaped piercing through the soft glow from the light.

"Shh, it's okay. It's over now."

She could just about make out silhouettes, but she knew it was Hopper. He was sitting on the side of the couch leaning over the other figure, causing the two shadows to meld together.

The deep voice was answered by a quiet whimper and Max felt her chest tighten.

It was Eleven.

The image of the Chief carrying an unconscious and bloody girl through the front door just a few hours ago was shocking to the red haired girl. None of the boys had mentioned what exactly she was capable of doing or what it did to her after the fact. It was scary and suddenly the cool and badass persona of Eleven was switched with a vulnerable girl being comforted by a parent.

"H-Hurts..."

Her voice was tiny.

"I know, kid. I know. But the hurt will go away."

"P-Promise?"

It took a moment for the deeper voice to reply.

"I promise."

The man placed a kiss into the deep curls and suddenly Max felt like she had inserted herself into a private moment. She decided against moving any further for the kitchen so she returned to her place on the floor beside Lucas and forced herself to fall asleep.

Despite everything.

The Snow Ball went off without a hitch. Max actually had a great time as she had finally gotten to share a kiss with Lucas. They spent the entirety of the dance together and she didn't really focus on anything else. The dozens of people around them were a little blurred to her, but she had turned to face Mike and saw him dancing with a familiar girl.

"Woah. Is that..."

Lucas glanced over his shoulder and smiled at the sight of his friends together. He turned back to Max.

"Finally."

The red head looked over Lucas' shoulder again to get a better look. For the first time since Max had known Mike, he looked happy. And Eleven, she was happy too. And that made Max smile. A wave of warmth washed through her, causing her to lean her head into Lucas' chest and let out a content sigh. It had been a long time since she felt this right.

In the lead up to the summer there was a lot of excitement in the air. School was just finished and the weather was getting good. Max had fit in well with the boys over the time since everything had happened. She hadn't really spent much time with Eleven, especially alone since she was always with Mike. But they were civil. Whenever the group would hang out, she would do her best to find out more about the still mysterious girl. Her speech pattern, or lack thereof, was one of the things that fascinated Max the most. Why did she talk like that? Where did she come from? She really didn't know anything about the girl.

It was one evening when the gang was hanging around in Mike's basement. They hadn't really done much that day other than play some Atari and discuss their surprise for Dustin's return. It had just hit 10 p.m so Lucas offered to walk Max home.

The sun was just starting to set. That was one of the things Max loved about summer. The late evenings and the fresh floral smell in the air. But there was something on her mind this evening.

"Hey, I have a question."

Lucas held her hand, playfully swinging them back and forth.

"Yeah?"

"It's about Eleven."

The boy looked down at her quizzically.

"What is it?"

She hesitated. Should she be asking this? She decided to just go for it.

"Why Eleven? I mean, that's her actual name? Is it some sort of-"

Lucas stopped walking, causing the red head to get pulled back slightly. She turned and saw his conflicted expression. Lucas had told her about what had happened with Will and how El had helped save him, but he didn't give Max any of El's background information, of which he himself knew very little.

"What?"

Lucas glanced up at her and sighed.

"I guess I kind of forgot you didn't know."

Max just gave him a look as if to say 'Yeah, no shit.'

He gave one last glance around to make sure they were alone in the night streets before continuing to walk beside the girl.

"Alright."

Max could see that the boy was thinking about what he was about to say. He turned to her.

"Have you ever looked at El's left arm?"

"Her left arm?"

She did not expect him to ask that.

"No, I haven't..."

Lucas was gauging if Max had figured anything out for herself.

"Well, when we first found El in the woods, back when we were looking for Will, she was scared. I mean like... really scared. Like a wild animal."

He wasn't really a fan of how he had just described her, but it was accurate.

"When we got back to Mike's house, he asked her name. And she showed him... a tattoo on her arm."

"Wait, she has a tattoo?"

Lucas looked sadly down at her.

"It's not as cool as you're imagining. Believe me."

Max felt like she wouldn't like what she would hear next. So she proceeded cautiously.

"What is it of?"

"Three numbers. Zero. One. One."

Max's mouth parted.

"Eleven."

She finished for him.

"Yeah..."

The red head's mind went down a dark thought process.

"Holy shit... It's literally her name..."

Lucas nodded with a sad look on his face.

"At first I thought she was crazy. I thought she'd escaped from a mental hospital."

"Lucas."

Her tone was accusatory causing him to raise his arms in defense.

"Hey, I was dumb. You don't have to tell me. I'm well aware. But in my defense, at the time I was just focused on finding Will. And yeah, now we're friends, but back then, it was different. And when a kid shows up in the middle of the woods with a shaved head and a number for a name what should you think?"

Max remained silent. In part, she agreed with him, but knowing that El was equally as scared as the boys were, she would have wanted to find out why. Albeit, Mike did.

"Alright, so the shaved hair, the number, the fact that she was scared of you guys..."

After a moment of thinking about the location and of Hawkins in general, it clicked. She stopped dead and turned to face Lucas.

"Hawkins Lab..."

The boy nodded.

"I remember my Mom reading about that place in the paper before we moved... Holy shit, El came from Hawkins Lab?"

"After everything went down and El left, some creepy guys from the lab came to our houses to tell us that El was dangerous and that we should tell them if she ever came back."

Max was listening intently.

"They told Mike's parents that she was a Russian spy."

"What?"

"Yeah, so we went to Hopper and that's when he told us... everything."

"Chief Hopper?"

"Yeah. Apparently, he was at the lab and saw where they used to keep her."

"Shit..."

"He didn't tell us specifics. Said he didn't want to upset us."

Max felt the amount of information weighing her down and she chose this moment to sit down on a nearby curb. Lucas joined her.

"Yeah. It's messed up..."

There was a silence for a moment.

"So, her powers... It's because of the lab? They, what, like experimented on her?"

Lucas waved his palm lightly through the air before resting it on his knee.

"We don't know for sure. She never talks about it."

Max nodded slowly.

"I mean, even the way she speaks. It would definitely explain..."

She began before trailing off and resting her cheek on her knee. Lucas saw the saddening expression on her face which seeped its way into him too.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. It's just... sad, y'know?"

"I know."

Lucas placed his hand over Max's and smiled reassuringly.

"But she has us now."

Max lifted up her head and returned the smile.

"And we have her."

Lucas nodded.

"Right."

The night air was their only companion as they let a comfortable silence drift past them. After a moment, Lucas held out his hand.

"Ready to go?"

"Yeah."

They both stood up and started to skip playfully through the street lights, doing their best to act like kids should and not kids who have been forced to grow up way too fast.

Max was happy to have found out even a little bit about Eleven's past, but now she also felt a need to help the girl in any way that she could.

At this stage, she couldn't have known just how much she would.

Dustin had returned from camp and their surprise for him didn't really go as planned. It ended up with Lucas getting half a can of Farrah Fawcett hairspray emptied into his eyes. But it was great to see Dustin again. The day of his return, though, was the hottest of the summer so far and as they sat on top of the hill waiting for Suzie to respond, Max could feel herself becoming sleepy. She half wished she and Lucas had managed to escape with Mike and El earlier.

It was funny, Max thought, that that was the last time she had seen Eleven before the girl had showed up outside her house the next day, her own skateboard in her hands. And as she approached her, Max

felt a little intimidated.

"Hi."

She was extremely confused.

"Hi?"

Those dark eyes bore into her soul it seemed. Something was bothering Eleven.

"Can we talk?"

This was not how Max saw her day going at all. Here was Eleven, sitting on her bed in her room asking for advice. Although, she did admit that the usual disarming expression that El wore was replaced with an almost child-like innocence that Max found incredibly endearing. So of course she did her best to help her.

And one of the ways to do that was to take her to the mall. To give her a new experience. And seeing the wondrous look of awe on her face at the Gap made Max feel like a proud guardian almost. El stopped when she saw a blue designed shirt on the display.

"Do you like that?"

"How do I know... what I like?"

She didn't expect those words to come from the other girl's mouth. She really didn't seem to have any grasp of her own identity.

"You just try things on until you find something that feels like you."

El's confused expression and wide eyed gaze was adorable, but it made Max's chest tighten a little.

"Like me?"

It was sad. She had no idea who she was.

"Yeah."

Max smiled.

"Not Hopper. Not Mike. You."

They spent the afternoon trying on different outfits and taking photographs together. Eleven, to her credit, did have a good taste in clothes. She looked good and Max felt proud to walk beside her in the mall. Secretly also because she knew how powerful she was. Then later, when they met the boys and Eleven told Mike that she dumped his ass, Max was seeing the other girl in a completely different light.

They went back to El and Hopper's cabin that evening. It was really nice just to be able to do kid things with El this time. Although, combining 'kid things' and Eleven gave some pretty unique results.

Seeing the girl using her powers first-hand was wild. The blindfold. The static. The blood. It gave Max a rush that she hadn't felt before. And once they got the okay to have a sleepover from a hilariously and obviously intoxicated Hopper, they decided to make it a bit more fun.

As they were setting up the board, Max couldn't help but think back to the moment she had walked in on that sad and tender moment between El and Hopper back at the Byers' house after El had closed the gate. Being on the other side of their family dynamic gave the red head a fresh image that was so much different. It made her smile.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

El nodded before spinning the clear bottle.

"Mr. Wheeler."

They both slowly read.

"Ugh, boring."

Max admitted, making the brunette snicker.

"Yeah, boring."

El cutely echoed.

"Spin again."

Eleven went to, but stopped herself.

"Against the rules?"

Another surprise. Was Eleven's fixation with rules from living with Hopper or from her time in the lab? Another crack formed in the red head's heart. She decided she needed to get Eleven out of this timid and held back outlook.

"We make our own rules."

At that answer, the girl's dark eyes softened and she spun the bottle again. Little did either girl know what they were about to see in that void.

Max and Eleven had spent the next day investigating what they had found out about Billy. It was tiring they had seemingly reached a dead end so they headed back to Max's house and got ready for bed. Max saw how distracted the other girl seemed so she held out her two comic books.

"Which one?"

Wonder Woman or Green Lantern.

"I don't know."

El crawled into the bed beside her and lay back against the head rest, expression still worried. It wasn't lost on Max who dropped the comics.

"Hey, there's nothing to worry about anymore, okay?"

El let out a breath.

"Doesn't make sense."

"What doesn't make sense?"

"Heather. The blood. The ice."

Max attempted to reason.

"Heather... had a fever so she took a cold bath, but she's better now. That has to be it."

She wasn't sure if she believed herself.

"I don't know where that blood came from, but we saw her. We both saw her. She's totally fine."

El turned away for a moment before looking at Max again.

"What about Billy?"

"What about him?"

"He seemed wrong."

Now this she could explain. She let out an amused breath.

"Wrong is kind of like his default, but it's nice to know he's not a murderer because that would have totally sucked."

She smiled at El which seemed to dispel her worry for now. She turned and looked down at one of the comic books.

"Who... is that?"

Max lit up.

"See, this is why you can't just hang out with Mike all the time."

She took the comic and opened it before leaning back against her pillow. She felt a weight against her shoulder as El rested her head against her, causing Max to feel a warmth spread through her.

"This is Wonder Woman, a.k.a. Princess Diana. She's from Paradise Island, which is like this hidden island where there are only women Amazon warriors..."

She explained everything about her favourite comic book character to the other girl until she turned the last page. She looked down to see that surprisingly, El's eyes were still open. But they were heavy. Max

put the comic books on her bedside table and let out a yawn.

"Wanna sleep?"

El simply nodded slowly and smiled up at the red head. Both girls flattened out their pillows and lay down facing each other.

"Thanks for... reading to me."

"Any time."

It only occurred to Max then that she had essentially just told Eleven a bedtime story. It made her internally laugh, but at the same time, as he looked at the other girl just inches away from her, she could really see how much she was still like a little child. Her eyes were closed and Max could see the darkness around them and the still somehow troubled expression etched into her face despite her being asleep. To tell the truth, El never seemed to be really at ease.

Max 's eyes wandered down the other girls' smooth and somewhat tanned skin to see her left arm peeking out from under the covers and resting just in front of her own face. She noticed a blue band around her thin wrist and then she saw it. Underneath the fabric.

011

Her heart sank and she immediately remembered what Lucas had told her. The tattoo. The shaved head. The lab.

What had she been through? In this moment, she wanted to shake her awake and ask her everything. But instead she scooted a little closer and took the girl's hand in both of hers, covering the ink, and held her warm skin against her chest. The sleeping girl unconsciously returned the grip and curled into Max's embrace.

And they stayed like this until morning.

In this moment, Max was terrified. They had Billy trapped in the sauna. He was begging, pleading for her to let him out. She had never seen her step-brother like this before. To mirror El's words from before; he seemed wrong. Only this time, it was on a whole other level.

So when Max heard Mike scream at her to get away from the door, she just about managed to jump out of the way of the glass that Billy had swiped at her.

"Let me out you bitch! Let me out! I'll fucking gut you!"

Then Lucas hit him with his wrist-rocket.

"Max, come on!"

It gave her enough time to get behind Eleven before Billy was able to burst through the door and attack. El managed to hold him back with a set of weights, but for the first time since any of them had known her, Eleven's strength had been matched. Perhaps that, mixed with the shock of the moment aided to how Billy was now holding El up by her throat, crushing her windpipe.

Nobody could move. It was absolutely terrifying. Billy had glanced over at Max as he was killing Eleven right in front of them. But not a second too soon, Mike broke out of his freeze frame and grabbed a pole, smashing it across Billy's back.

"Go to hell you piece of shit!"

His new found bravery was squashed simply by Billy's strength. And once again he had the upper hand. Mike was against the wall and as Billy was about to strike, Eleven was back on her feet and had the monster-like teen held in mid air. She fiercely screamed before making her way back in front of Mike and with one last effort she flung Billy through the brick wall of the gym.

El immediately collapsed back into Mike's arms. Max glanced at Lucas who looked like he was about to cry. Will wiped at his damp eyes and let out a shuddered breath. After a moment, they each made their way over to the hole in the wall and watched Billy stumble away into the night.

Max turned and stood in front of El, taking her lightly by the shoulders. Blood dripped from her nose and she looked exhausted.

"Are you okay?"

Eleven nodded, but Max and Mike saw the look in her eyes.

She was far from okay.

She ran a cloth under the cool water before reaching up to wipe the blood away from underneath El's nose. She caught a glimpse of the angry red bruise along her throat. Somehow, it looked more like a scar.

"Does it still hurt?"

El rubbed around the bruise.

"Only when I talk."

Max then made a point to tell her how she's lucky that she isn't Mike or else it wouldn't ever stop hurting, doing her best to make the other girl laugh after the horrific events of the previous night.

Nancy and Jonathan ended up coming over soon after when it turned out that what they were investigating somehow linked with what the kids had been dealing with. That night, they ended up at the hospital, but again they had been attacked. Only this time, it wasn't Billy.

When they had burst through the door and saw what was about to kill Nancy...

"Jesus."

Mike muttered.

"What the fuck?"

Was all Max could say before Eleven took hold of the grotesque creature and smashed it into every wall in the room before getting it as far away as possible. It went sailing through the wall to the outside and by the time they had exited through the front entrance, the entity had melted and disappeared through a nearby drain.

This was so much worse than they thought.

The only thing that Nancy or any of the kids could think of doing

next was getting El to figure out where the flayed were. That included Heather, her parents, Mrs. Driscoll, Bruce or Billy. It was a large task, but they didn't have other options. They needed El.

But at this stage, El had been in her room for nearly an hour, the only noise being the static from her television.

"It can't be good for her to be in there for this long."

Mike said worriedly.

Max admitted it was a bit unnerving, but they needed to trust Eleven. She had already saved their lives numerous times.

"Mike, you need to relax."

But Mike was pacing right outside El's door.

"What if she gets brain damage or something?"

"Oh, shit. Is that like a real thing?"

Lucas suddenly grew ten times more concerned.

"No, it's not. He made it up. Mike doesn't know what the hell he's talking about."

"Oh, and you do?"

"No, I don't. And that's the difference between you and me. At least I don't keep telling myself that I know what's best when really the only one who knows her limits is Eleven."

Max had now stood up and Mike ran his hands through his hair in frustration.

"You don't understand."

"No, Mike, you don't understand. El isn't stupid."

"I never said she was. I just don't want her to get hurt. She's pushing herself way too hard."

"God, stop saying that!"

Max took this moment to bring the argument over to Nancy, Jonathan and Will.

"Okay, can you guys settle an argument for us? Who do you think should decide El's limits? Mike or Eleven?"

"The way that you frame that is such bullshit."

Nancy watched her little brother's frustration intensify.

"It's not bullshit, Mike. This is your whole problem. And it's also precisely the reason why she dumped your ass."

Nancy's eyebrows disappeared into her fringe.

"El dumped you?"

"Yeah, because she is conspiring against me."

Mike explained, gesturing towards Max.

"She's corrupting her."

"No, enlightening her."

Max fired back.

"The fact is she's not yours. She's her own person fully capable of making her own decisions."

"She's risking her life for no reason."

Well that was completely false.

"For no reason? Mike, the flayed are out there doing God knows what."

Nancy reasoned, not fully believing what her brother had just used in his argument.

"Killing, flaying..."

Lucas added.

"Transforming into monsters."

Will contributed.

"And El's not stupid. She knows her abilities better than any of us."

"Exactly, thank you."

Max agreed with Nancy's statement.

"And she is her own person."

"Exactly."

"With her own free will."

"Exactly."

Max emphasized one last time.

"El has saved the world twice, and Mike still doesn't trust her."

This is where Mike lost it.

"You wanna talk about trust, really? After you made Eleven spy on us?"

This made Lucas' ears perk up.

"Wait, what?"

"Oh, she didn't tell you this?"

"No."

"Your girlfriend used El's powers to spy on us."

"No, no, no. I did not make her. It was her idea. And why are we even talking about this? Seriously."

"Yeah, who cares?"

Will was getting fed up of everybody raising their voices. It all seemed very dramatic to him.

"I care."

Lucas said firmly.

"Yeah, I guess girlfriends don't lie, they spy."

Mike cleverly announced to the room.

"We were just joking around."

"Wouldn't it've been so funny if I was taking a massive shit or something?"

"You weren't."

Max was at her wit's end.

"But what if I was?"

"Then gross!"

"Seriously, Mike?"

Nancy was now in big sister mode, already over her little brother's attitude.

"I'm just trying to demonstrate how careless Max is with Eleven's powers. In fact, how careless all of you are. You're treating her like some kind of machine when she's not a machine, and I don't want her to die looking for the flayed when they've obviously vanished off the face of the Earth. So can we please just come up with a new plan because I love her and I can't lose her again."

Then there was a silence. Everybody looked at Mike and it took him a moment to realise what he had just admitted, seemingly to his friends before he had to himself. Lucas smiled bashfully down at Will.

Eleven chose this moment to open her bedroom door and step out.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

Mike immediately told her.

"Just a family discussion."

Lucas added, causing Eleven to frown.

"Oh."

She instantly felt like she was intruding and Mike immediately felt sorry for her. Max too.

After a moment, El blinked.

"I found him."

"Found who?"

Nancy asked.

El had managed to find Billy, but they realised that it had been a trap. So Eleven suggested that she try to reach into his past like she had done with her mother to see what had happened to him. Mike was worried for her and told her so, but after Eleven requested that he trust him, and a reassuring look from Max, Mike nodded, telling her to be careful.

Watching Eleven go back in was excruciatingly tense. Especially this time because they all knew, Max more than anyone, how messed up Billy was. And it showed when El started to pant and whimper behind her blindfold, but once she let them know she was okay, she continued. Max figured out from the description that El gave that she was in California. In a memory.

Eventually, El reached the source.

"Where, El. Where are you?"

Max asked her.

"Brimborn Steelworks."

Once Jonathan confirmed the location it was time to get her out of there.

"El, El, we found it. Get out of there. Get out."

Mike let her know. But it wasn't immediate. Instead, El began to struggle again and even seemed to be crying.

"No... no..."

Her small voice shook.

"El?"

Max leaned forward and shot a concerned glance at Mike.

Then all of a sudden she ripped off the blindfold.

"No!"

She fell into Mike who was down beside her in an instant and started crying. When she eventually calmed down she explained what Billy had told her inside the void. How the Mind Flayer was building his monster for her specifically and how he was going to kill everyone else along the way. But Nancy surmised that because El had talked to him in this very room, that he knew where they were. Will was able to confirm this so they set to work at boarding themselves up inside the cabin.

It didn't work however, and instantly the monsters claws had breached their barricades. Jonathan managed to get a good swing with his axe, but it only proved to anger the beast as after he tried a second time he was flung across the room. Nancy then managed to get a few gunshots off before he had her backed against the wall.

She was saved by El who ripped off the spiky clawed end of the tentacle, which then retreated out the hole right beside Max.

"Holy shit."

She commented before two more claws broke through and shot right towards Eleven, but the girl stopped them both mid flight and they

met the same fate as the first one. But a split second after El destroyed them, the head of the monster broke through the roof and grabbed El by the leg, pulling her up towards him.

Mike reacted first, managing to catch El by the arm and pull her back towards him. Jonathan then reached up and grabbed hold of her yellow and black shirt. Max arrived, followed by Will who all had a strong hold on their friend. They were keeping her from being taken away, but they were also adding to the pressure that made her feel like she was about to be ripped in half. She screamed as she felt her joints stretch to their limits.

"Nancy, shoot it!"

Jonathan shouted and a few shots were fired at the disgusting face above them. That alone wasn't going to work. They needed to sever the claw from El.

"Come on! Lucas!"

Max yelled and Lucas grabbed the axe and set to work at chopping at the claw. After four agonising chops coupled with Nancy's shots, the monster finally was separated from Eleven, who fell unceremoniously on top of Mike. He held her in his arms.

"El! El, are you okay?"

She looked almost unconscious, only nodding weakly. He looked down to see the end of the claw still clamped around El's leg. He reached down and pulled it away with all his might. The sound of it's teeth dislodging from Eleven's flesh, coupled with her agonizing scream sent shivers down Max's spine.

The ugly mix of teeth and flesh stared down into the cabin, causing Eleven to slowly stand up and hold up her arms. She used every last bit of strength, boosted with how pissed off she was, to rip that giant face in two. She immediately collapsed back into Max's arms, but what she was able to just do gave them all enough time to get out of the cabin and into the car.

From there they made their way back towards Hawkins.

When they arrived back at the town they stopped into a supermarket to treat El's leg wound. Max and Mike helped each other to carry the injured El behind Nancy who had grabbed some rubbing alcohol and bandages.

"Okay, get her down."

They set Eleven down on the floor.

"Okay, lemme see."

Nancy pulled up her trouser leg and immediately blood started to ooze out of the wound.

"Shit."

Max instinctively said and El groaned. The red head looked up to see that the girl was sweating profusely. Even the bruise around her neck looked like it had gotten worse.

Nancy began opening the bandages.

"Woah, hey, what are you doing?"

Max stopped her.

"I'm cleaning the wound."

"No, first, we need to stop the bleeding, then clean, then disinfect, then bandage."

They looked at her like she had ten heads.

"I skateboard. Trust me."

Once Max took over taking care of El, they bandaged her up and headed to the only safe place they could think of where they could gather themselves.

Starcourt Mall.

They had arrived just at the last minute for Eleven to save Dustin, Steve, Robin and Erica. They came down and embraced Dustin,

giving everyone a chance to fill each other in on what had happened since they last saw each other. Which was a lot.

What nobody noticed, however, was how Eleven had strayed from the group, a deep static ringing in her head and an intense heat rushing through her causing her to collapse to the ground. It took the group a moment to realise what had happened before they rushed over to their fallen friend and turned her onto her back.

It was her leg. It looked wrong. Just like Eleven had described Billy back in Max's room. Jonathan had gone to get a knife and as soon as he gave El the spoon to bite down on, everybody began to panic. Max felt herself begin to hyperventilate. She glanced up at Lucas who gave her a sad look in return. Then without anymore hesitation, Jonathan cut into her.

And then she screamed. And that's all that happened for the next few minutes. El writhing in agony as Jonathan desperately searched for the entity inside of her. At one point, Mike looked up at Max with El's vice-like grip twisting in his hand. His eyes told her exactly how he was feeling.

Terrified.

Eventually the pain became too much for her and she sat up, spitting the spoon out of her mouth.

"I can do it."

She sounded exhausted. She held out her hand and immediately the atmosphere around her swelled. Everybody could feel an intense pressure until the glass behind them shattered, causing them to flinch back. After Max was sure that El's throat had been completely shredded, the claw had been removed and thrown across the mall.

Then the adults arrived.

Max watched how Hopper gathered his daughter in his arms and took care of her. The image of his drunken face was now replaced with one more like the original picture she had in her back at the Byers', with love and tenderness. She looked like a little child in his much

bigger arms, holding the drink up to her lips. When it was time to go, Max saw the sweet smile El gave Hopper before allowing her and Mike to take her into their arms.

And then a plan was formed. The kids were to go to Murray's bunker while the adults went to close the gate. El had insisted she could fight alongside her dad, but of course he wouldn't let her, especially when they knew the Mind Flayer was after her specifically. That and also she was in no state.

This was no more prominent than when Mike and Max were carrying the spent Eleven to the car. Her weight was almost entirely being carried for her and her nose was bleeding again. Max could hear her pained whimpers too.

"El, you're bleeding."

"Are you okay?"

Mike asked.

"Yeah."

El's reply was breathy and strained.

She was struggling.

But as it turned out, the car was tampered with and they couldn't leave the mall.

So here they were, hiding behind a stand from the giant monster which was now ten times bigger than it was back at the hospital. Even if El had her powers she wasn't sure if she could pick that thing up by herself.

Nancy, Jonathan, Lucas and Will managed to meet up with Steve and Heather outside the mall and draw the monster away to chase their car. If they could keep that thing away from Eleven until Hopper, Joyce and Murray closed the gate then that's what they would try to do.

But just as Mike and Max brought El outside, Billy spotted them,

immediately alerting the monster and causing him to turn around and head back for the mall. So Max and Mike brought El back in through the service door and did their best to find anywhere to stay hidden, which would prove a lot more difficult as Billy could follow them anywhere they went.

And he did.

He caught up to them and as Max tried to appeal to her brother he harshly smacked her aside. She was knocked to the floor in a heavy daze and could wearily hear a scuffle above her. She looked up just in time to see Mike already out cold and Eleven's unconscious body being carried away by Billy.

Then she passed out.

She came to very slowly. She blinked open her eyes and almost immediately her situation became familiar to her again. She glanced across to see Mike close to her and crawled over to him.

"Mike. Mike. Mike, get up. Mike, can you hear me? Mike! Mike!"

The boy slowly regained conscious.

"Hey, come on."

She helped him stand.

"You okay?"

Once he gained his bearings he scanned the room and shot a worried glance back at Max.

"Where's El?"

Without an answer, they took off back towards the food court. With every meter closer they came to Billy the clearer the rumbling became. Sounds of horrible inhumane screaming and explosions rang throughout the building. It only increased the dread that was now filling Mike and Max's blood.

They finally made it to Scoops Ahoy and out through the broken door

to see the overwhelming sight of the giant figure of the Mind Flayer's monster looming over the zombie-like figure of Billy who had the weakened Eleven at his feet, about to present her to his master.

They could only watch in horror as the monster opened it's mouth and shot it's claw directly at El.

"No!"

It was Billy's voice. Billy's.

He had reached forward and stopped the monster from reaching El and taking her. Instead, he kept hold on the giant arm, completely free of the Mind Flayer's influence over him. He screamed in defiance, protecting the girl that had saved him with her humanity, reaching his own that was buried deep inside under the darkness.

Then the unthinkable happened.

He was stabbed. Over and over again by the tentacles of the monster. It was horrifying. Max, Mike and Eleven saw the killing blow hit Billy directly in the chest as he fell to the ground next to El.

Then as soon as it happened, the monster began roaring and twisting before it crumpled to the ground and died. All that moved were flames that surrounded the mass of flesh and bones.

Mike immediately sprinted for El who was on her knees just staring at Billy. Once he grabbed her by the shoulders she was jolted out of her trance and grabbed his face.

"El!"

"Mike! Are you okay?"

Max slowly approached, passing by their embrace and reaching down for her dying brother.

"Billy?"

Blood soaked through the giant wound on his chest, the flayed black veins still fading from his skin. She took his hand and squeezed as

tight as she could.

"Billy, Billy, get up, please. Billy, get up, please, please."

She begged him, but he could only look up at her crying face with pain in his eyes.

"I'm sorry..."

"Billy..."

And with one last exhale, the life left his body.

"Billy, wake up. Billy, get up. Please, Billy..."

She shook his shoulders trying to get him to come around, not believing what she had just seen. Then it hit her. And she broke down sobbing.

She felt gentle arms pull her back and she found herself in Eleven's embrace. She clutched onto El's shirt and listened to the girl's soft voice.

"It's okay. It's okay."

El turned back to Mike who could only stare back in shock before looking at Billy and then the monster.

None of it seemed real...

And then the army men came. Everyone had been brought outside to where numerous ambulances were waiting to treat their various wounds. Eleven sat next to Mike on the back of an ambulance getting her head wound taken care of. Suddenly Mike looked up to see a bunch of army guys leading Joyce and Murray to the parking lot.

"Hey, it's Ms. Byers."

They both watched as Will ran towards his mother and they embraced. El stood up and limped around, scanning the vicinity near Joyce. Through the rain she managed to make out that Murray guy. But the more time passed without finding her Dad the more her worst

fear was being realised. And then she saw Joyce's face.

She knew.

Gone.

She felt what little strength she had managed to regain completely vanish again and she fell down so that she was sitting in the rain on the cold, wet ground, face buried in her hands.

Immediately Mike was by her side.

"El! El!"

He wrapped his arms around her, but she didn't move. She just continued to cry.

"Gone..."

Was all she was able to mutter and Mike felt his heart drop. A pair of feet landed in front of them and after a moment Joyce lowered down to kneel in front of the crying girl.

"Sweetie, I'm so sorry."

Hearing the woman's voice, El looked up slowly into her eyes. That did it. Joyce immediately leaned forward and enveloped the girl in her arms. She held onto her for dear life and cried with her, vowing to never let go.

Mike stood up and saw Will next to him.

"Hopper."

Was all the younger boy needed to hear before his face dropped. Mike rested a hand on his best friend's shoulder and they both exchanged a heartfelt look before they, too, embraced.

A few feet away, Max sat next to Lucas, her hand in his, watching the exchange of heavy emotion in the pouring rain and from then on she knew.

Things would never be the same again.

They were leaving. After everything, they were leaving. And El was going with them. It was surreal and unbelievable. But there they were, standing outside the Byers' empty house, crying and hugging and saying their goodbyes.

"Please don't fight."

It was El's only request for Mike and Max. Her voice was soft and light, but she meant it.

"We won't."

Mike assured her.

"We promise."

Max added.

And as she watched the van pulling away, followed by the car behind it, Max thought back to how she had gotten to know the enigma that is Eleven. El Hopper. The girl who she saw throw cars with her mind. The girl whose identity she helped find. The girl who risked her life over and over again for her friends. The girl who she could now call her best friend. And then her heart filled up with pride.

She turned to Mike in the warm summer evening glow and smiled up at him. He blinked at her and returned the gesture.

"Whaddaya say? For El."

Mike thought for a moment before placing a hand on Max's shoulder.

"For El."